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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of culture in educational development, especially as it applies to the adoption of systems from one culture to another. This study stems from the Project on Human Potential, a study of educational development from the perspectives of the social and behavioral sciences. The major message was that there is no one way to characterize appropriate environments for learning--that culture demands a pluralistic approach. Different cultures discussed are: European, East African, and particularly the Japanese. (SI)

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"Cultural Factors in the Transfer of Western Educational Models to Non-Western Environments"

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Cultural Factors in the Transfer of Western Educational Models to Non-Western Environments

Educational development since the 1960's has been modeled on economic development, and this has led to several serious problems, most notably, to the expectation that if we can reduce education to quantifiable outcomes, such as measurement by later earning levels, or by test scores, that transfer of methods and curriculum is expedited. The gross national product of a country may be a useful indicator for purposes of comparison, but it has little to say about the conditions of life, or even the goals and values of a society. Similarly, test scores, however numerical, are not extractable from the cultural context and the sources of satisfaction and support which make life meaningful in diverse ways in many societies. I want to discuss the role of culture in educational development, especially as it applies to the adoption of systems from one culture to another.

My remarks today come out of a study I was part of here for several years, the Project on Human Potential, which was a study of educational development from the perspectives of the social and behavioral sciences. We were to provide a base line of thinking about the ideas of development which pervade academic considerations of

children's potential, and the Foundation which sponsored this study would translate these into guidelines for policymakers. Incidentally, one of the big problems we had in the study was caused by the separation of scholarly expertise from "ordinary knowledge", gained through experience, and although it is customary to blame the ivory tower for this, in fact it is evident that often those responsible for policy feel the need to avoid us, and most academics who contribute to development work are hired as consultants in projects whose frame and goals are already established, and thus they cannot help shape the study or intervention, and are probably not greatly attended to. The breadth and depth of academic studies are generally ignored, and no one is in the business of bridging the gap.

Our major message was that there is no one way to characterize appropriate environments for learning -- that culture demands a pluralistic approach. We began by looking historically at learning before the introduction of modern schools. Schools were widespread -- mostly associated with religious traditions, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu and Islamic. There were schools representing less broadly distributed beliefs, such as the bush schools of West Africa, and the Aztec and Incan schools of Mexico and Peru. What was common to these schools? First, they

were explicitly tied to religious beliefs and practises. Second, learning took place in a hierarchical relationship of teacher and pupil which included from the teacher, parent-like authority and responsibility; and from the child, obedience and obligation -- but also reciprocity and the knowledge that the meaning of the relationship went beyond the activities of the classroom or the child's test results. The major task was mastery of sacred texts, and not necessarily through literacy. Sometimes texts were read or memorized in a language not used for daily life. Learning a text was valued in itself as an act of religious devotion. School was to provide a means for acquiring virtue, not the tools for developing a career.

Schools fit into community definitions of age and gender priorities -- so often older teachers were more greatly valued, and seen as models of virtue, and often women were excluded from schooling as they might have been from full participation in religion. Schools were not highly organized and although there was an establ ished path through the stages of learning, there was no modern age-graded curriculum nor was there a public evaluation of individual performance through bureaucratized testing, except perhaps in the elite schools preparing candidates for entrance into the Chinese Imperial bureaucracy. Since schooling was not

tied to economic production, competition for wealth, or other goods -- which were distributed on other principles than that of educational credentials--, those who stopped attending them were not labelled as failures or diminished in their future life chances.

This portrait is of course vastly overdrawn and represents no single premodern institution accurately: There were exceptions on every point, but all shared elements of most of the above.

These schools still exist as religious schools, but for the most part they have been superseded by bureaucratic Western style schools, and religious schooling is seen as supplementary. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the modern school spread almost everywhere, sometimes in advance of industrial development and urbanization. However, it is interesting to note that there were actually more schools and more children attending them, particularly more girls attending them, in parts of India before the British school was introduced than after.

The meaning of education has been drastically altered by this spread. The most important difference between pre-modern and modern schooling is that modern educational systems are closely tied to the occupational structure, namely the bureaucratically arrayed hierarchy of jobs. This has replaced agrarian ways of arranging

for a person's life chances such as caste or hereditary occupations or apprenticeships and patronage. Further, modern schools are closely linked to national administrative development, and are seen as an instrument of public policy. Most usually, schools are made accessible to populations previously denied an education -- poor people, women, rural residents.

Teaching in modern schools becomes less personal in the sense that the teacher knows less about the child's whole environment, and the teacher's relationship with the student is more and more restricted to the hours of school and the place of the classroom, and constrained even more within this milieu by a new consensus on his or her functions. The teacher used to be a full mentor, often responsible for a child over several years, and responsible not just for academic performances but also for the child's social behavior, his or her "virtue", and sometimes acted as go-between in marriage and godparent to his or her children. The modern teacher, a transmitter of a planned curriculum under the constraint of a time clock and bureaucratic ideas of progress and measurement, doesn't take dinner with the family of each of his or her students -- unless we're talking about Japan -- but more on that exception later.

A standard format and expectations helped to facilitate school expansion and administration. School administrations, evolved out of church hierarchies and army models of organization, especially in Napoleonic France, and in later developing countries in explicit emulation of growing bureaucratic structures in government as well.

What I am most interested in here are the psychosocial contexts of the transformation. These provide interesting and sometimes problematic evidence of the power of culture to adapt, resist or itself to transform the alien transplant in societies which have adopted universal bureaucratic forms of schooling today.

School as we know it today, in contrast to the pre-modern school, is based on the premise that literacy and other cognitive skills give the individual a wider awareness of potential and choice; and also provide the individual with the means to compete on the basis of either credentials in achievement (diplomas and degrees) or by means of the competitive advantage gained from possessing the skills themselves. This means that the student can ideally see himself in the competition for scarce resources, such as good jobs, as developing skills which will be useful and necessary in his future life. More usually, however, and ESPECIALLY more usually in the later-developing countries, the skills

are not the object, but are only the means for acquiring credentials by which to gain access to a job -- and more and more, the credentials themselves have lost the power to guarantee appropriate work. I saw a graffito on a wall in New Delhi which said, "Give your son an M.A, throw your future away", illustrating the cynicism many people feel about the outcomes of schooling, and not incidentally, the inability of the modern educational system to maintain the reciprocal obligations between the generations. The son with an MA presumably will not be able to support his ageing parents, a traditional responsibility.

School no longer means the acquisition of virtue formerly at least potentially available to everyone. Rather, along with the options and aspirations it provides and encourages, it means possible failure as well as possible success, since scarce rewards are offered in a competitive environment. Because schools are tied to a bureaucratic hierarchy, success means upward mobility on a shrinking pyramid, rather than competence, productivity and satisfactions in a given field of work. Schools introduce the potential for failure then, and the frustration of unachieved ambition.

Second, whereas in traditional societies, the group defined an individual's parameters of identity,

in the modern school, self-assertion, personal striving and competition are introduced along with the measurement of success and failure. The individual is the unit which is measured, and the potential for invidious comparisons with others causes much anxiety in parents and studetns, in cultures where it has not traditionally existed, where families and relationships in groups have greater identity value than does the individual, and where a person is rarely measured against another.

Eleanor Leacock has written about the effects of European education in East Africa, and the distortions such things as discipline and rote learning, and a fixed curriculum, as well as competition through test-taking, have introduced. She says that children there are losing their sense of community, their identity with the natural environment, and their indigenous ideologies and symbol sytems, in exchange for gaining rational, scientific information and a place on an ability-based ladder.

Leacock noticed, however, that the schools have adjusted the European classroom experience to African psycho-social norms and learning practises. First, she noticed that children are taught to share, rather than to consider even a pencil as their private property. Privatistic selfishness is discouraged. Second,

children are protected from the anxiety of individual performance by the use of group recital, but could perform individually if they raised their hands to do so. Children helped each other and supported one another as they performed or worked together. Finally, she saw that the teachers incorporated the traditional modes of storytelling and public discourse in their teaching and were far more skilled in presentation and sensitivity to the audience than their Western counterparts-- they had style and confidence which did not come from their own formal education.

The lack of fit between Western bureaucratic education and the indigenous cultural values surrounding learning and personal development has been accommodated differently in different cultures. The environment which has most interested me is that of Japan, since on the face of it, Japan is the most modern country in the world, but modern does not mean Western. A walk in a Japanese city will deceive a new visitor for the pace, the amenities, the glitter and the technology seem very familiar, or may be the object of some envy. But a closer look at any Japanese environment -- home, factory, bar or classroom -- alerts us to the power of culture to assert its priorities.

Japan borrowed Western forms of schooling in the late 19th century, after sending teams of officials and

scholars to many Western countries to assess their educational systems. Japan had already, before the advent of these schools in 1872, a very high rate of literacy and strong support from parents and community leaders for education. In this climate, the rate of enrollment in the new schools reached 98%, the rate which exists today, in the first few years. But the schools were not carbon copies of the French, German or American schools which had inspired the planners. And they have increased, rather than decreased, in their distinctiveness, ever since (except for the immediate post war years when the Occupation reforms created for a time a version of the American school across Japan).

Americans might assume that the high test scores Japanese children achieve, particularly in math and science, are the product of a highly disciplined, personal achievement-oriented environment. And they assume that the Japanese child is struggling against a nearly militaristic harshness to define himself, as he yields unwillingly to the regime of endless study. We cannot imagine children being as happy as the Japanese child is just to go to school in the morning -- and by the way, in international surveys, the Japanese child has been seen to like school more than children of other societies. And we certainly cannot imagine that the child himself feels engaged and

motivated to work hard, that the process of learning is not one of opposition between generations, parent-child and teacher-child.

I have spoken to various groups before including some of you, about Japanese schools, so I will try not to repeat myself. In summary, though, what works about Japanese education is not only what the Japanese planners borrowed from the West, but what they did to adapt the educational system to Japanese priorities, contexts, and methods.

What is particularly of interest is how traditional modes of relationships, particularly between children and teachers, how traditional pedagogical methods and views of the child's development, have persisted, and in fact shape the experience of school for the child today. As in Africa, the Japanese have minimized the problem of competition for their children, and used incentives based on relationships rather than motivation through an appeal to personal gain. Children love the work that the teacher loves, and the teacher emphasizes engagement through connecting the work to be done to the experience of every day life and, like the AFrican teacher of pre-modern times, a connection to the natural environment -- a fifth grade social studies teacher I observed in Tokyo entered the classroom, and went to the front of the room, saying nothing, but

grinning mischievously, and dumped a large shopping bag full of fresh fish of all kinds on the desk. The class was studying the fishing industry, and handling the fish, passing them around, sometimes holding their noses, they learned what fish come from what part of the ocean, which are surface and which ground feeders, and what methods are needed to catch fish of different types. Another teacher sent chills of excitement down my back as he exhorted his math class by telling them passionately how beautiful the solution was to the algebraic problem they had in front ofthem -- he said, Please believe me, it will be beautiful, no matter what your aesthetic tastes are; this will be worth the effort! And he literally jumped up and down with excitement.

So the first factor in the success of Japanese schooling may well be the teachers -- and their priority not on the results of tests, but on the engagement of the children -- stemming from pre-modern cultural priorities. Teachers value effort over ability, and this is seen as available to all children. Ability is not innate, and can be developed through plain hard work. But to get the child to work hard the teacher (and mother, by the way, as she is an important part of the learning process in Japan) inspire the child to feel that to comply with their goals is to affirm his or her

own self, which in any case is not seen to be at odds with them. Teachers and parents are never on the other side of a fence from the child, and avoid confronting the child. The valued interdependence between child and adult ensures that obedience is rewarded by indulgence, but "spoiling" in our sense rarely occurs. Being part of a relationship or a member of a group is a goal, not a means, and the distinction between external social expectations and the child's own personal goals becomes blurred.

Competition in elementary schools at least is avoided, and work is often assigned to small groups of children rather than to individuals, and yet the teacher is always aware of how each child is doing, and knows who needs extra attention. Within these small groups there is a child leader, a rotating responsibility, and he or she is coached by the teacher to encourage team members and slow children are matched to faster ones to support and teach them. The ultimate competitive environment, that of the examinations for entrance into universities, is highly visible in the media and there is a large industry of exam-related materials, after school cram classes, even dietary items which are to help children in their studies. For most children the experience is a compartmentalized and buffered form of competition: first, it is not seen

as a struggle against other individuals, and those around the child, teachers, parents and others, are on the side of the child against the exam. There is an attempt to remove it from the school environment, and teachers resist using school time as cramming time. This is supported politically by the Japanese Teachers' Union as counterproductive to the real goal of learning which is the "development of children in harmonious relationships". There are certainly pathologies related to the exams -- I don't want to minimize problems -- and reformers are talking now about changing the system. What the exams represent is a moment of late ascription -- when one's life chances are fixed -- in a meritocratic system. The adjustment between the more indulgent, non-individuated schooling of the early years and the lonely experience of cramming for exams is insufficiently made for many children. But this doesn't represent the whole system: and Americans are still curious as to how they do it.

The curriculum of Japnese schools resembles ours, even if theirs is by our standards, accelerated -- note that all high school children have had biology, chemistry, physics and earth sciences, and all have had calculus. Where we differ is in how our children learn. I would like to suggest that contemporary Japanese pedagogies are based in pre-modern cultural ideas of the

child, ability and the appropriate places of satisfaction and personal identity which, like those of the non-Western world, emphasize social rather than individuated potential, harmony over competition, and relationships as the goal as well as the means of committing effort to tasks. Unlike much of the non-Western world, however, the Japanese educational system has managed to build these traditional virtues into a program that works in the modern world. It is on the others, those cultures that receive and must endure alien values along with alien institutions, who are less able to adapt, that our concern should be focussed.

A final point: we are beginning now to see that cultures quite different from ours may have something to teach us: Americans are looking, especially at Japan. But there may be lessons for Western education in systems and values we have not yet considered: borrowing and transfer may be a two-way street.